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  - Hoque, Sharmin, Oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, December 21, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn, 2018.006.54; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Oral History Interview with Sharmin Hoque

Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.54

Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on December 21, 2018  
at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

STRONG: So today is Friday, December 21st. We are at the Brooklyn Historical Society. My name is Liz Strong. I'm here with Sharmin. Why don't you just introduce yourself and say when and where you were born, and we'll go from there.

HOQUE: Yeah, I'm Sharmin Hoque. I was born in Bangladesh, in a village in Noakhali, and I came here when I was almost five, just like right before kindergarten. I very specifically remember I had a month to get ready [laughter] for school. So, yeah, that's where I -- that's when I came. And I moved to East New York in Brooklyn.

STRONG: What were your first impressions, if you remember them? You were so young.

HOQUE: It felt dirty. [laughter] I remember because I grew up in the village in Bangladesh, and it was just -- you know, it was clean, it was green, beautiful. And then we -- I only remember going out of the village to, like, the cities a couple times, and we went to Dhaka, obviously, to go to the airport and come here. I don't remember the visa process, as much -- I just have, like, a random memory of my brother -- but I remember it was, like -- there was a lot of traffic, and it was dirty, and it was, like, a city, and I wasn't used to it. And then we came here, and I was like, this is -- this is, like, the same thing. And it didn't -- it -- I don't think it registered in me that we moved; I just knew we took, like, a plane ride, but it was like, this is still a dirty city. [laughter] Where am I?

STRONG: What was it like getting ready for school?

HOQUE: It was -- it was definitely hard. My, my dad had come here for years before, and he had applied for my mother, my brother, and I, so my mom was very, also, new to the country and didn't know any English, so our neighbors told her, "Well, she needs to learn English before she starts school." So the way I learned English was I sat in front of the TV for about 20 hours a day, [laughter] and watched whatever was on. So I think it was, like, during the daytime PBS cartoons, and then during the afternoon, whatever

channel we had, we would just watch, and I think I just absorbed it in that way. Probably, looking back at it now, not the most healthy way [laughter] to teach your child English. I wear glasses now, so that probably was because I was watching TV for 20 hours a day, but that's the best way my mom knew how. And because of her adapting to, like, what she could do, I guess I know English now.

STRONG: So what was it like starting school? What were your impressions of it?

HOQUE: It was -- it was awful. I remember just being confused at, like, having to go to school in a country, like, that was completely new to me. I, I guess I registered that I was in a new country once I was like, "Wait, where are all my family members?" And I remember my grandfather used to take me to school, and I would cry every single day. For about a month he would sit there with me for about, like, a couple hours a day, until I would finally, like -- I'd be okay. And then after a while I think I definitely -- it helped a lot to be around other kids, and I was able to, like -- I just was able to practice the language that I'd heard on the TV and seen on the TV for, like, about two months. And once I was able to make friends, I was like, "Okay, Grandpa, like, I'm okay now." [laughter]

STRONG: He really just sat in the back of the room?

HOQUE: Yeah, he would be there every single day with me for a few hours, and I think that was the only reason I was able to adjust so quickly.

STRONG: That's so wonderful.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: So you had extended family living here already, or did they follow you?

HOQUE: So my grandfather, my dad's father, my dada, actually came to the US a year before we came, and that was the only extended family at the time. And he was a schoolteacher and a principal back in Bangladesh, so I think he was used to just the school environment, and was able to sit there for three hours every single day and just be there for me, 'cause I think -- he wouldn't talk to me necessarily, but I would see him there and I felt like that was a comforting presence, and it definitely helped.

STRONG: So were you and he close? Tell me about who he is, or was.



HOQUE: Yeah, we were very, very close. He was, again, like, a schoolteacher, and the principal, and I didn't know him like that -- I think I was just way too young -- I just knew him as my grandfather. And, like, when I was -- when I was born in Bangladesh, I was my parents' first child, and I was pretty much raised by my grandparents. They did most of the heavy lifting, actually, and I would do everything with him. I would go out with him. I'd pray with him. I -- like, he taught me -- when I came to the US, he taught me English, Arabic, and Bengali, like, all three languages. He was like, "You're four years old; let's do this [laughter] while your brain is, like, still absorbing everything." We were very, very close. He took me to school up until the fifth grade.

STRONG: He would walk you there, and...?

HOQUE: He would walk me to school. Even after we moved, he would still walk me to school every day. It was only when he wasn't feeling well, or when my mom was like, "You know what? I'll take her," that that changed, and it very quickly became a routine for us. And he would tell me stories about how he felt about my grandma, and it was just -- it was a really great time with him.

STRONG: So what did you learn about your family history through those stories?

HOQUE: I remember very specifically, like, one day walking home with him, and he was explaining to me how he was so happy that I loved to read. I was a super big nerd, loved reading. I was, like, absorbing, like, *The New York Times* when I was in the first grade. [laughter] I don't think I knew what it was saying, but I loved reading. And so he was telling me just how proud he was that I loved to read, because my grandmother, who's illiterate, right, he tr-- he talked to me about how he tried teaching her for years, like, how to, like, recognize symbols, and it was very difficult for her to grasp, but neither of them gave up. And, I mean, eventually she learned how to s-- like, write her name, and, like, recognize her name and, like, some numbers. So he was like -- it was just so great for him to get me to, like, learn to, like, read and love to read. And I just remember thinking, like, wow, that's so nice you didn't give up on her, 'cause I think I would've. [laughter] But yeah, he would talk about just different stories, silly stories with my dad. I learned different parts of my dad that I did not know, [laughter] about

all the trouble that he used to get into, and my uncles. It was a really good bonding time for us.

STRONG: Tell me a little bit about your parents and who they are.

HOQUE: Yeah, so my parents are -- it's interesting because my parents are much younger than my peers' parents. My parents were like 19 and 22 when they had me, so, like, I -- they were already a parent -- like, like, parents of me, like, at my age. And my father came to the US in 1991, or '90, I believe, through the diversity visa. So in a way it was just chance, you know? It was fate, it was chance, that he ended up here.

I remember my grandfather used to live in Saudi Arabia, and then he just -- like, for a few years, to work there, and he decided to stop working. He wanted to come back to Bangladesh and, like, retire. And I think my dad, feeling that as the oldest son now he has to take care of his family, was like, "I'm going to try to go to the US," and my grandfather was like, "Do not, because I'm here, I'm going to take care of you guys." And I think a story that my grandmother told me was that when my grandfather was on his way back my dad decided to come to America. [laughter] And so it was like this, like, missed connection kind of thing. I think my grandfather was very upset, because, I mean, my dad was venturing out to a new country by himself at 18.

My dad came here and connected with some of my grandfather's friends, who were much older, who were working different, like, jobs, like manual labor, construction and stuff. And he told me that they all wanted him to go to school, but he felt this obligation to support his family back home. And he entered this world of working, [laughter] and he has not stopped since. And over the years my dad has worked a variety of jobs. He used to be -- he used to own a construction company, and they did really well, and they were doing, like, houses all throughout Brooklyn. They were doing houses upstate. I remember very specifically he used to work for this doctor who had a factory, a coat factory, in upstate, and, like, the guy would send us coats every winter. And I had this, like, red one with, like, black hearts, and, like, I just for some reason only

remember that jacket. It was super cute, [laughter] and I wish I could have it as, as an adult.

But yeah, he used to work in construction with a couple other partners, but now he -- in the last few years I think he decided to have a more, I guess, predictable schedule, and now he's a taxi driver. He drives a taxi every night. Doesn't take as many breaks as he needs to, but that's how he's supported my family, and he's always been there to support us, no matter what.

STRONG: What about your mom?

HOQUE: And my mom has been a stay-at-home mom forever. She's never worked, but she's been so involved in, you know, fostering a sense of community with other women in the neighborhood. They've always been part of a, a religious organization, Muslim Ummah of North America [MUNA]. And that's where -- like, both of my parents were involved in that. They both attended, like, regularly, weekly or monthly, like, circles with other people. And I think that really helped my mom create an identity outside of just being our mother. And I think that support that she's had since I was a kid, and, like, she still has now in a bigger capacity, has always been very helpful for her, because they do a lot of community work, volunteer work. They are always meeting. Often I come over to my mom's house and she's not there because she has a -- like, you know, her weekly circle. And that's what she does. She's just been more than just our mom, but she's been definitely an important part of the community in her own way.

STRONG: Just through this organization or through other ways, as well?

HOQUE: Mostly through this organization, and I think the organization has definitely branched out a lot over the years, and she's grown out of that, too. They're lo-- not as local anymore, they're national now, and she's been involved in a variety of things, along with my dad. But I think it's important for her because she's not working, and now that my -- me and my -- like, my brothers and I are a little older, it gives her a lot of other things to do that she enjoys.

STRONG: Tell me about your relationship with your brother.

HOQUE: Yeah, I have two younger brothers, and we're all about four to five years apart, so I think it's really well spaced out. [laughter] My -- we're -- our birthdays are all like two weeks apart. It's, like, me -- it's me, my brother, and then -- my baby brother, my middle brother, and then me. Two weeks, one month. It's a lot of birthdays. [laughter] And it's been interesting: I've been talking a lot with friends and family, especially now that I work in so much parenting work. I was just talking to someone about how a lot of immigrant children end up raising their siblings, like the older ones, but I never had that. I think that my mom definitely spoiled me. I never had chores, [laughter] which has adversely affected me throughout the last couple years. And I never had -- like, I never had to babysit my brothers. I never had to take care of them in a way that a lot of other immigrant and just other kids of color do, that I know of. And so I never had to parent them. I was always just, like, the older sister, and I was always just, like... We were never particularly close, but I wouldn't say that we were very separated. I was a teenager. I was an emo teenager. I didn't really care for my brothers, [laughter] like that. I guess I -- I know I loved them, but I was never really talking to them. But now that they're older it's a little different. They're currently 15 and 20, and it's very different.

STRONG: Different how?

HOQUE: It's -- I think I finally feel like I'm in that older sister role. They come to me and confide in me in a lot of things that I would've never probably given them that space before. And I think that's part of my own growth, too; like, I'm reaching out to them, and they're reaching out to me. They're -- you know, they have their antics, as teenagers do, and I think now that some of it is very unfamiliar to my parents, they're expecting me to now step in, and all of a sudden now I'm a parent of my siblings. So it's been something to figure out for myself, because I've never had that kind of relationship with them, but all of a sudden now my parents are like, "You can discipline them and, like, see, like, like, how you want to, like, go about the situation." Like, they're giving -- they're -- they've handed me that mantle, and in a way it's been really cool because I get to be with my brothers in a way that I've never been before, and in

another way it's, like, a lot of pressure, because teenage boys are not easy to raise.  
 [laughter] But, you know, they're -- they come over to my house all the time. They're always at my apartment. They're perfect for when I have a lot of leftover food,  
 [laughter] 'cause they'll clear out the fridge. But I think they just sometimes come over just to have my company, and it's, it's been wonderful.

STRONG: That's really great. Another thing I want to ask you about is your experience of religious communities in East New York. I know you said --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- there were at least two that you were a part of throughout your life, so walk me through that.

HOQUE: Yeah, so since my parents were so heavily involved in the MUNA organization, I was naturally also very involved in that, and, like, they, they had the child circles, as well, the children's circles, and so many of my friends from the community I've met through that. I would also go to the weekly -- monthly -- I can't even remember how often they were now -- circles, and we would, like, learn about Islam, and we would learn about -- you know, we would learn very -- like, a lot of stories. We would learn how to read Arabic, and, like, read the Qur'an. And it was a very, very big part of my life, for a very long time.

And it was kind of interesting because my dad was involved in it with the brothers; my mom was involved in it with the sisters; I was involved in it with the kids. It was a big part in our house. And I experienced it in various ways throughout my life. Sometimes it was really supportive, and it felt like a really good space. Sometimes it felt stifling because I think there were a lot of expectations because I was there for so long, so, like, when I grew up it was like all of a sudden I'm expected to do all these things now. And so I've always had a very -- what's the word? -- fluctuating relationship. Like, again, like, sometimes it was just the space that I needed to be with my, like, young sisters and feel that support and, you know, be able to talk to them when things got hard, and

sometimes it didn't feel like that. So, complicated relationship, but also just such a big part of how I grew up.

And that's where, like, the spaces came in. I think that as I got a little older, maybe junior high, that's when the masjids were being built, and being built bigger than just, like, a basement in someone's house, which was what we experienced when I was younger. When I was younger, it was a basement in someone's house, and traditionally men would go. Women -- I don't know how they felt about women being in the spaces, but I think a lot of times it was, like, a logistical thing, where it's like, there's not a lot of space for even men, so [laughter] if you're not -- if you don't -- like, if you're not, like, obligated to pray in, like, a communal space, then you're not going to go. But I would -- I would go for just, like, tutoring, and I always -- my grandfather was my Qur'an teacher, but also he was super annoying about always having supplemental t-- like, tutoring for everything. I always had, like, two tutors for everything. [laughter]

And so I would also go to the masjid. And then when I got to junior high, all of a sudden these masjids had a little more funding, because more Bangladeshis started living and settling in East New York, and all of a sudden women were going now to the masjid. And I remember praying my first Friday Jummah prayer there. It was like, oh, this is -- this is new. [laughter]

STRONG: So not in a basement; like, in a, a building?

HOQUE: No, it was like we had an actual floor to ourselves, and it was funny because, I mean, when we would go out to different parts of New York -- so, like, when we'd go to Jackson Heights to do shopping -- there was always a masjid there that we'd go to where it was, like, literally maybe a closet for women, and it's 2018 and it's still a closet [laughter] for women. So that was the only time we ever really went to the masjid. So then to have this, like, floor to ourselves with, like, windows and a bathroom, [laughter] it was new. It was very new.

STRONG: Which mosque was this?

HOQUE: This was Baitul Mamur in East New York, and it was -- I remember there were s-- there were so many women who came, and then so many women who were also very vocally like, "I can't go to the masjid." So it was -- it was -- it became very complicated for women, too, 'cause these are women who never went to the masjid in Bangladesh, and then they come here and they're not going, either, and all of a sudden now there's a space for them and they don't know what to do with it. And I think because of my parents' involvement in this stuff -- my dad was involved in the building of it from the beginning -- that my parents, there was no, like, "Oh my God, we can't go." So I was from -- there from the beginning. It was a huge shift in the culture of, like, Bangladeshis in that part of East New York, because women were never going out to the masjid before that.

STRONG: Can you give me an example of, like, some of the conversations you were hearing, or some of the situations people were adjusting?

HOQUE: Well, I mean, some people were like just -- they were like, "I don't need to go to the masjid. I'm a woman." [laughter] Like, "What am I -- what am I going to do there?" And then there were more, like -- harsher conversations, like, where some people were like, "I'm not allowed to go to the masjid," or men were like, "You're not allowed to go." And I think that the masjid board's welcoming of women was what was different, because at the same time Baitul Mamur was being built, Masjid Al-Aman was being built, and that one, there was a very different message, like, "This space is not for you, women." And so there was a lot of confusion for a lot of women, and I wish I could, like, look back at that now as an adult, and, like, wish I could, like, listen to those conversations with the perspective that I have now where women were very confused as to what to do, and I think it took a lot of time for women to get adjusted to g-- even going to, like, the Friday prayers, because it always felt like a man's world, and now all of a sudden for some of these spaces, you're being given, like, a glimpse into, like, the men's world, and some people didn't know what to do with it. Yeah.

STRONG: When we talked on the phone you said that you and your mother had some experiences of trying to go to Al-Aman but it wasn't quite a right fit. Can you tell me about that?

HOQUE: Yeah. I mean, I also -- I moved to the Brooklyn part of Ozone Park when I was in the fourth grade, and I was a block away from Al-Aman. We used to live a block away. And I remember I went to tutoring there, then, the masjid Sunday school tutoring there, because that was just closest, and I had, like, a couple friends there, and I was like, "Ma, I want to come here." So that was the last time -- that summer of, like, end of fifth grade was the last time that I ever actually stepped foot into Al-Aman, which is pretty wild to me. It just was never a welcoming space for women, and I know that, like, my mother and a few of her friends had definitely tried to go in and -- unsuccessfully, and I think that it puts a real... It's a real challenge for the community, because you have some masjids in the area that are so welcome and open to women being there, and, like, having in -- like, you know, events. Like, it's just like there's a lot of engagement, and then there's this one masjid that's just, like, bigger than most of the other ones that doesn't allow women, and it just felt like a huge disconnect.

STRONG: So she actually had an experience of being --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- turned away? Can you --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- tell me that story?

HOQUE: I don't want to tell it because I don't know fully what happened, but what I heard, I remember as a maybe high-schooler when this happened, is that they tried to go to a -- an event with a visiting scholar and they were turned away. And it was just like, do you not want women to get this knowledge, too? [laughter] And it was just complicated, particularly -- like I said, we lived a block away from Al-Aman, and so in Ramadan, where we're going every night to a masjid to pray -- to pray Tarawih, we're literally walking past this masjid that's so close to us just to walk, like, 10, 12 blocks further to another one. And I remember just being like, this just -- this is so dumb. Why are we



walking past one that's just so close to us? And, like, at that time we would all walk, like -- a few families, we would all walk together, and, like, people were always commenting, because sometimes you could hear -- sometimes if we were late to prayer you could hear the prayer, like the sounds from Al-Aman's windows, but I'm like... And there was this one summer where there was this imam who had this amazing, beautiful recitation, and we could hear him, because they had a really good mic system, I guess, but we could hear him from the outside, and it just made me feel very sad that this wasn't -- I couldn't experience it in the way that I wanted to.

STRONG: I'm curious about the experiences of women praying in masjid versus praying at home. When you pray at home, is it solitary? Are there prayer circles? What's that experience like?

HOQUE: Well, with the five daily prayers you're usually praying by yourself. It's kind of [laughter] logistically impossible to find other people. Yeah, it's, it's definitely a different experience praying in a mosque, because you're praying with other people. There's a whole different aspect to praying in a communal space. And, you know, it's whatever you need at that moment. Sometimes I just need to be alone, and I need to reflect by myself, and I'm like, I don't want to go to the masjid. And even right now, frankly, I don't go to the masjid regularly to pray, because I don't feel like I need to. But just having that option is what's so important. It's like, when I feel like I need that communal space, where I need to, like, pray with other women, like, pray standing side-by-side with other women, like, I want to be able to have that option to go and get what I need. And I don't -- because I was young when this shift happened, like, I don't know what it's like to, like, be an adult and not be allowed to access that, to have that available to you.

STRONG: I'm curious, personally, about how your thoughts and feelings about your faith or your relationship to your faith may have evolved as you grew up.

HOQUE: Yeah, my relationship to my faith has definitely been complicated over the years, and I think much of it had to do with the spaces that I was in. I went to an Islamic

school for junior high and high school, so pretty big chunk of what I call my life right now, 24 years. [laughter] It's a lot of --

STRONG: What school was it?

HOQUE: It was Al-Ihsan Academy in Queens, in Ozone Park, definitely Queens side of Queens [laughter] -- Ozone Park, and Richmond Hill. And I think that people's... I, I, I ask people now, like, whenever people come up to me and they're like, "Should I put my kid in Islamic school? What do you think, since you went there?" I'm always like, "What is your intention? Like, what do you want to get out of it, and what is the Islamic school going to do for your child that you as a parent cannot do?" And I think that a lot of parents are like, "Oh, like, you're going to learn Islam there. Like, it's going to help you become a better Muslim." And often for parents it's like, I can hand my child off to this school and let them teach them how to be a good Muslim; I don't have to put in that much effort. And then some -- for some other parents it's like, this is a supplemental thing.

And so I think with my parents, with as much t-- [laughter] tutoring and classes that my grandfather was giving me at that time, they were like, "This is a good supplement for you, and we heard it's a good school. We don't want you getting mixed up with the American way of life. We don't want you getting knocked up and, like, the..." You know, like, that was their intention. And I think that that definitely impacted my faith, sometimes in good ways and sometimes in really bad ways, because I was there for, like, most of my formative years. It was -- my entire teenage years I was, like, there. And my relationship with my faith has evolved so much from where I was back in high school, where, because I think so much of it was, like, built into the curriculum that I didn't feel as connected. It was, like, part of a ritual.

So now it's like I'm now a working professional. I don't have to answer to anybody but myself, so anything that I do with my faith is something that I'm choosing to do and not because it's part of the school's schedule. So we had prayer every single day after

lunch. That was, like, one of the big perks of going to an Islamic school is that you actually have a s-- like, a designated prayer time. But now, like, after -- like, it was such a huge shift when I went to college, and I was like, oh, no one's telling me to pray. Like, if I'm going to pray, like, I have to be the one that goes and does it. And that was a -- I had to reconcile a lot of that, how that made me feel.

And I've definitely gone through, like, ups and downs of, like, feeling very faithless at times, and feeling like anything that I was doing was just ritualistic, and I'm doing it only because I have, you know, been engrain-- it's, like, been engrained in me to do it, you know, pray the five times a day. And then sometimes it's a lot more beautiful. And I think even sometimes the -- where I feel hopeless and faithless, that's also beautiful, 'cause that's a part of just being a Muslim for me, like, going through the ups and downs.

STRONG: Can you give me an example of a practice that you feel very connected to now for your own reasons?

HOQUE: I think definitely wearing hijab.

STRONG: Tell me about that.

HOQUE: You know, we had the hijab as a uniform at my Islamic school, so it was a part of what you're wearing every day, and a lot of kids did not wear it outside of the school, and sometimes I was -- I was definitely one of those kids that, like, took off the hijab, you know, in the bus stop [laughter] and put it back on, because that was, like -- that was a part of the uniform. Like, that was something you had to do. But now, again, like, in college, you don't have that uniform. You know, you don't -- I don't have to wear the hijab. Like, even if my -- like, my parents are not seeing me while I'm in college. And I've definitely felt very... I don't know how to define it.

I think that at this point I don't know where that, like, magic a-ha moment happened for me, but at -- I can say now hijab is a very integral part of who I am, and I, I don't see myself taking it off no matter how my faith is. And I think that that was, like -- that was

what was different for me. Like, the -- like, how I'm feeling about my hijab -- like, I sometimes hate how I look in hijab. Sometimes I have bad hijab days. Sometimes I'm like, that outfit would be super cute if I wasn't wearing it. But at the same time, it's not tied to my faith. It, like, feels like its own separate entity sometimes. [laughter] And, like, I don't -- I, I don't think I've ever -- like, when I'm not feeling very particularly, like, religious or spiritual, where I'm like, "Eh, I don't -- why am I even wearing this thing?", I think it's just like this whole separate, like, [laughter] creature at this point, and I don't see myself tying myself -- like, tying it to my -- like, my fluctuations in faith. Most of my hijab comments to myself are very superficial. [laughter]

And I think that just shows to me, like, how much is just -- it's a part of me, almost. It's like this weird -- I'm thinking of, like, Venom in comics. [laughter] Like, it's like -- it's this thing that's on my head, and, like, I love it, and sometimes I hate it, but, like, I really mostly just love it. And it's just who I am as a Muslim woman, and I think there's a certain strength in that for me, particularly in this climate, to be very visibly Muslim. In a way, it, like -- it -- for a lot of people, it gives a statement to other people that I don't actually have to say. And how a person takes it is on them and how they view the hijab, but it's my statement. It's my unspoken statement to other people that I am -- I hate the word "unapologetic." [laughter] I think it's just been used and abused in the last few years. Like, that -- I'm just -- this is me. This is who I am. But it is intrinsically a part of me being a Muslim.

STRONG: Can you give me an example of how it affects the way you move through the world, or conversations it starts, or, you know, how you see that impact on other people around you, as you're so openly yourself?

HOQUE: Yeah. It depends on the spaces that I'm in. When I'm with other friends who wear hijab, we often don't -- it's just -- we're not thinking about it. We make comments like -- when I'm with my other hijabi friends, they'll be like, "Oh, your hijab does not -- you didn't tie that nicely today," or "Ooh, I love the way you tied that." But, like, other people who don't really wear hijab won't know -- I'm, like -- here I am, I'm like, this, like,

fold on my forehead did not fall nicely, but my friends are like, “You look exactly the same [laughter] as you do every single day.”

And then I’m definitely sometimes in very conservative Muslim spaces where my hijab doesn’t feel enough, where it’s like, ooh, you should’ve cov-- like, you know, you’re not modest enough. Like, ooh, your hair is showing. I see your ankles. I see your hair. And then I’m in, like, conservative right-wing spaces, and they’re just like, “That -- you look like a terrorist.” Or sometimes I’m in liberal spaces where people are just like, “Oh, I love your hijab,” [laughter] and, you know, making it this huge thing where I’m just like, it’s just -- like, it’s just who... Like, can we not make this a big deal? [laughter] And so I -- in every single space I’m in, it -- I get a different response. And I think my favorite is when people just accept it as a part of me. And I’ve been in spaces like that. I think my workplace is one like that.

I’ve heard a lot of horror stories from a lot of people growing up about wearing the hijab, and how it affected them in college, how it affected them in grad school, how it affected them when they moved to their professional life. And I don’t think that I’ve ever had that issue. I mean, I’ve had moments that have stood out, where I was abused, like, verbally, or sometimes even physically, because of how Muslim I look. But I think growing up in a very concentrated Muslim space, I, I didn’t really notice it until I was the only one who was wearing it. And that’s when I’m like, ooh, I’m the weird one now.

And in college it definitely felt okay at times, because I had a lot -- there was a lot of other hijabis in college. I went to college in Brooklyn, you know. Like, it -- my school -- my undergrad was very much a representative of how Brooklyn really was. And, like, when you talk about diverse campuses, like, it wasn’t a forced -- it didn’t feel forced. It was like, this is naturally Brooklyn. You know, you had your Muslims with, like, full face covering, and, like, you had your Orthodox Jewish women who would come into school and, like, went -- it was like, on the weekend, not on Saturday, they had special

accommodations. And you had -- like, it was just very naturally diverse, and so I don't think I ever felt weird in that space.

Grad school [laughter] was very different. Columbia [University], all of a sudden, I was like, this is not diverse at all. I think Columbia was probably my first experience with a lot of White people. I just grew up with so many people of color that I never was in a space where there were more White people than there were people of color, and all of a sudden I'm coming to this school and I was like, this is a lot of young White women. And then there was, like, the few of us [laughter] who were people of color. And then just being so visibly Muslim in that space, it was a little hard.

I had a friend who wore hijab in the beginning of grad school, and then she had taken it off, I think, maybe sometime in the first year, and then all of a sudden I was the only one again without -- like, you know, the only one again that was, like, visibly Muslim. And I had a little crisis there because I was, like, well, how is my professional life going to look like, where I'm, again, the only one wearing it? And I was like, "Am I going to fit in? Is this going to impact how people view me? Is this going to impact my job interviews? How am I going to pay my student loans?" [laughter] And then just, like, spiraling.

But I've definitely felt that I'm very grateful for public health, because I'm not working in a corporate space. I'm never -- in my field, I'm never going to work in a corporate space, I hope. [laughter] And so in -- there's some comfort in that, in that people generally, in the spaces that I want to work in, are more accepting. I mean, they might still have their weird liberal views of it, and, like, fetishize me in a way that they might not want to, or intentionally not doing it, but I'm still in a space where I'm not going to be attacked, or, like, visibly harassed. And so that gave me some sort of comfort. Like, I'm not an accounting major, [laughter] you know? I'm not a finance person, so I think I'll be fine. And I think it was that, that, like, fake self-confidence that, like, got me

through my job interviews after grad school, and then going to work in a space where I'm like, okay, I don't feel like I'm -- even though I'm the only one here wearing hijab, like, I don't feel super targeted. I'm still different, but it's not a -- it's not a bad different. And then it felt like Brooklyn again in that sense.

STRONG: I'm really curious to hear, on the record, about your trajectory into this career in public health. So let's go back to LIU [Long Island University], [laughter] what you were studying there, and then take me forward.

HOQUE: Yeah. Like many kids in high school, I wanted to get a good job where I made a lot of money, [laughter] and at that pharmacy seemed like the natural option. I was like, I'm not going to go to med school. That's way too long of a wait. I want to, like, make money quick, and I want it to be, like, a respectable career, not too crazy with the hours and whatever. Pharmacy just felt like the natural option.

Then I went through orgo [organic chemistry] and I was like, ew, [laughter] I don't know. I don't know if this is right for me. And I worked, like, you know, in a pharmacy, and I was like, this is -- this is not me. This was just -- it just -- it didn't feel right, and then I was having this crisis. I'm like, crap, I'm like two years in. What do I do? I, like -- my parents spent all this money at a private school for me because they thought I was going to do pharmacy when I could've just went to a CUNY [City University of New York] and, like, gotten another -- like, good education in another major. What do I do?

And I remember talking about it with my parents. I think my mom was upset because she was like, "You just did all this work. Like, you know, don't give up. Don't quit." And my dad's like, "Look, if she wants to do it, let her." And I was like, whoa. [laughter] This is very different from a lot of my friends and, like, how they grew up. They didn't have that option. But I think for my parents it was more like, "We don't want you waking up in 15 years and hating your job and blaming it on us. If you're going to hate your job, [laughter] it's going to be because you chose it." So that's kind of where they were coming from. They were just like, "Look, you know best what you want to do with your

life.” And that was a huge relief, as someone who’s -- a lot of my friends have gone into careers that they felt pressured into. So I was like, “Okay, cool, I can drop pharmacy.” [laughter]

And then I was like, “Crap, what do I do now?” And I then changed my major to health sciences, and that day will always be memorable to me because that was the first day I met my husband. He was like, like, “Oh, so what do you do?” And I was like, “Oh, I’m actually...” Like, we’re talking online, we’re chatting. He’s like, “What do you do?” I was like, “Oh, I’m actually changing my major today. [laughter] I’m changing it to health sciences.” He’s like, “Really? Cool, ’cause I’m doing my master’s in public health right now.” He, he swears that he was the influence, but I promise it was not.

In the health science major, one of the first classes was just, like, an intro to health sciences, and they had every week a person from a different profession come and just talk about how it’s been, and I think the public health really stood out to me because it was -- I’ve always cared about social issues, and so it was like, oh, you guys care about social issues; it’s not client- or patient-based; you’re talking about, you know, race and class and religion and, like, all this other stuff. Like, this seems like something I want to explore.

And so I started taking some of the other public health classes, and I would hear from my husband, who was not my husband at the time, about his grad school classes, and it just was -- it was like, this is stuff I’m interested in, but I can actually get a job with it, [laughter] is where that inspiration came from. So it was not -- it wasn’t a profound moment or anything. I was like, I can get paid to, like, rant about social justice, [laughter] and, like, try to make the world a better place. And so I was -- I was like, I want to do something very community-based, because I’ve just been involved in so many community things. I’ve been, you know, with my parents’ organization, I’ve just -- I was just naturally in these, like, advocacy and community-based spaces, so it was like



-- to make a career out of that made sense. It made sense particularly because I was also -- I got really sick around that time, and I realized, like, medications were not necessarily helping but lifestyle changes did. And so that was very profound for me, to be able to, like, have a more holistic view of my own health, instead of just, like, taking the pills that I was taking every day, was very helpful for me to be, like, "Oh, look, public health is working for me." [laughter]

So yeah, I started doing internships in community spaces. I interned at the [New York City] Department of Health, and it just felt right. And Columbia had this program, Sociomedical Sciences, where, you know, it was the best of, like, both worlds for me. I was learning sociology; there was a little bit of hard science, without orgo, [laughter] which is a deal-breaker for me. It just felt like it was right. And I didn't think I was going to get in. I was like, oh my God, my GPA [grade point average] was, like, tanked by all these hard science classes. But I guess someone in the admissions office saw that I was taking these public health classes, that I was doing well, [laughter] and decided to give me a chance. And I don't regret that at all.

STRONG: So tell me about your studies at Columbia. Did your view on what you wanted to do change further while you were there?

HOQUE: I think I became more jaded. I, like, went in like this super optimistic kid -- I'm going to save the world -- and then I go in and I'm like, oh, this is a lot of White people talking about a lot of White things, and I'm not fitting into this space.

STRONG: Like I'm five, what do White people talking about White things [laughter] sound like?

HOQUE: Well, so one of the things that was a huge struggle for me was when I would be in a class and they're talking about this health issue, this health issue that other people -- and, you know, this, like, issue that other people outside of this classroom are having, and I'm like, hello, those other people are in here as your students, [laughter] you know, as your colleagues. And it was just, like, this weird outsider perspective. And it was just funny 'cause we were always talking about, you know, how Whiteness and

White supremacy works into public health, and I'm, like, literally seeing it happen in our space.

Just thinking about the demographic again, it was, like, again, mostly young, eager White women wanting to go out and save the world, and then, like, you had a few people of color, like, you know, thrown in in the mix, and that felt forced to me. It wasn't like LIU [Long Island University], where it was, like, a more natural diversity. So it was -- I, I definitely became a little jaded, especially 'cause we started hearing about all of the dark history that public health has. I was like, do I really want to be here? [laughter] You know, we're talking about how, you know, people of color, particularly Black bodies, were used to further public health.

I think one of the most difficult times for me was I was like, I want to do maternal health. I want to do, like -- focus on, like, women, and particularly pregnant women. I want to focus on infants. And then learning about how gynecology came about, and the dark history of, like, how women who were enslaved were tested, I was like, mm... [laughter] Like, just, like, internal groaning a lot of the time. And it was difficult because I was like, do I really want to be perpetuating the same things in my community?

But there were so many other great moments at Columbia. I learned from so many people who were also feeling the same concern that I was. I was never alone. Any time - - and this has just been my life -- like, any time I think I'm the only person thinking this, I'm never. I always find other people to share that affinity with me. And so being able to talk to other people who also had those concerns, who have done work before they came to... I was this, like, kid who came straight out of undergrad. I was the youngest person in my class. I didn't have the job experience that some of these people did. So just hearing from other people, I'm like, okay, you know what? I can actually work to undo some of that. Like, I can change people's perceptions on public health. It might

not be me individually -- it might be the projects that I'm working on, or where I'm working -- but I can -- I don't have to be super negative about this.

And I think sometimes I still feel very jaded about public health, and rightfully so, because not everyone's intentions are great, and sometimes intentions are great but impact is not, and so I think it's always going to be a constant battle for me.

STRONG: So what brought you from there to NYU [New York University] Langone?

HOQUE: I think that talking to -- when I -- you know, when I started being interested in maternal health, and, like, you know, infant and child health, and we're doing all these classes, and we're talking about parenting, and I'm naturally -- whenever I learn something I'm, like, always going out to my friends and talking about, like, this thing that I learned. You know, we started talking about parenting, and just realizing, like, how different everyone's parenting experiences were, and I was like, whoa. This is, like, a huge... The way you are parented is such a huge -- plays such a huge impact on how you -- like, who you are later in the future. And, you know, talking to my husband, we were raised very differently. We're both Bangladeshis. I think our parents are from very close regions in Bangladesh, and yet we were raised so differently: very different values; very different, like, upbringings. And I really wanted to examine why.

And thinking about, like mental health, and, like... Sorry. Thinking about mental health, and how much, like, our parents' way of, like, bringing us up impacted our mental health, I was like, "I want to explore this." So when it came time, like, "Oh, crap, I gotta do my thesis," I did a research proposal on, like, how parenting practices in South Asian communities in New York City impacts the child's mental health later on in the future. And then when I'm job hunting, I find this place that has a program called ParentCorps, [laughter] that is looking at, you know, teaching kids social/emotional skills, and at the same time teaching parents some proactive strategies. And I was like, oh, was this program made for me? [laughter] So yeah, that also felt very natural.

STRONG: So mental health was an interest very early on, then.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: Can you give me an example of how that kind of conversation came into your life?

HOQUE: I think that definitely has to go back to getting sick in college.

STRONG: Okay.

HOQUE: You know, I had this weird, like, weight fluctuation. I was, like, losing 17 pounds and then gaining 17 -- it was very rough time. And then I wasn't doing that well in my classes. It was like -- I thought I was supposed to be a pharmacist, and I can barely, like, pass. There were just other stressors that were happening in my life, and I've -- I was very depressed, and I was very anxious, and I struggled. I struggled a lot to reconcile those feelings. Like, does this make me a bad Muslim? Because that was what I got all my life. Like, if you're a Muslim, you're always -- you're always supposed to be thinking about things that you're, like, grateful for. Like, I'm blessed. And meanwhile, all I could think of is, like, I don't have this and I don't have that and I wish I could've done this differently and I wish this was done differently. And I was like, ooh, these two don't match up. Am I a terrible Muslim? [laughter] Like, no matter how many times I pray, I don't feel like I'm feeling -- I don't feel better.

And then it was -- it was hard, because I got very mixed messages from people when I reached out. Some people would be like, "Oh, you know, you should just pray more." And I was like, "Hello, I'm trying!" And some people were just like, "Well, maybe you should just take some medicine." And I was like, "I don't wanna do that." And so, like, nothing felt right. And it was just -- it was -- it did feel like a very dark time in my life because I didn't know what to do with all those feelings that I was having. And then, you know, I just started researching and reading, like I love to do, and just exploring how there are so many people out there who were talking about how much we need to, like, talk about faith and mental health, and how feeling depressed is not -- does not make you a bad Muslim, and that telling someone to pray, like, and not helping them, is not helpful. And I was like, whoa, those are my people. [laughter]

And, again, like, I -- I, I think I always seek out opinions to validate my own, and so finding those was extremely validating. And then I was just like, I want to explore this more. Like, why do I feel so depressed? You know, and I would, like, try to do those, like, gratefulness lists, like things I'm grateful for, and they would always devolve into things I wish I had [laughter]. I wish I had better grades in orgo. Or, like, you know, it just... Once I started reading up, like, I was, like, devouring all this information that I found on the internet, and it -- and then I started talking about it with my husband.

You know, we, we decided that we were right from each other pretty early on. We're -- I think I was more hesitant to determine that, but we wanted to get married, and we got married fairly young. I was almost 20 when I got married. I turned 20, like, literally a co-- a few weeks later. And that also impacted my mental health, 'cause I was like, ooh, I'm, like -- none of my other friends are married. I'm, like, the only married one. And, like, when I told people I was married, like, non-Bangladeshi people -- or sometimes, like, when I told people I was married people were like, "Your parents arranged that for you, right?" "Are your parents forcing you to get married? You can tell me. I'll help you." And I'm like, "What? What are you talking about?" So that also impacted my mental health a lot.

I remember going to the... I remember going to the gynecologist a month after I got married, and the woman was like, "So you're married, huh? How old's your husband? Like 40? I heard people in your culture get married just like that." And I was like... I think I reported her, [laughter] because that was just very incompetent to me, to, like, say something like that. Just those things really impacted my mental health, 'cause I was like, here I am. I love this person. I think he's right for me. And yet, everyone's trying to make me doubt it, and make me feel like I made a really dumb decision. "You got married so early. Like, why would you do that? You're, like, ending your life right here. You want to go to grad school? Okay." You know, it was -- it really adversely

impacted what I thought of myself, because I started second guessing. Now, like, well, it's a little too late to back out now, [laughter] I'm already married. And then thinking of, like, the social stigma of, like, getting married and then getting divorced, like, literally within a year. And then I was like, but that doesn't make sense, 'cause I still love him.

So talking about my mental health with my husband, who was also interested in mental health for his own reasons, I think we realized, like, some -- like, we want to do something with this. And I remember he was like, "You know, we're both public health professionals. We both love research." He was like, "We should create a think tank." [laughter]

STRONG: Yes.

HOQUE: And I was like, "I don't think it's that easy, but let's, like..." And we would always talk about it. We were like, "We should create an organization to talk about mental health the way we talk about it with ourselves. You know, it would be super helpful." And it was like... It just kind of fell through. You know, we were going through grad school. We were trying to, like, find... All this stuff was happening at the same time in our lives for us. You know, one cool thing about getting married early is that you grow together, and we were -- we had [laughter] a lot of stuff that was going on for us, and it just kind of fell through the cracks.

And then Thrive NYC came out, and Thrive NYC is, like, a mental health roadmap for all, and had these, like, big, huge, ambitious ideas. And we're like, well, where do Muslims fit into this? Because we -- like, we can't even get people, like, to, like, admit that there's a road, you know, much less, like, giving them this roadmap. And I think -- I mean, again, you're never alone in your thoughts and opinions, because while we're thinking, like, we want to do something, a lot of other people were, too.

And so, you know, when someone reached out to me, when Sadyia [Khalique] reached out and was like, "I want to start something, just a small group." And it was Dr. Sarah Sayeed who was like, "I want to give you guys this space in the Mayor's Office of Community Affairs, like, here -- like, you know, we -- let's talk about this. Let's see what we can do." And it wasn't going to be an organization; it was just, like, a few people who were interested in this, wanting to talk about mental health. And we were like, "Ooh, Thrive NYC sounds cool. Can we make it, like -- can we do something like that for Muslims?"

And we talked and we talked, and we kept coming together for meetings, and we're like, let's have an event on depression, just -- and anxiety, just, like, general 101, mental health 101. And it went really successfully, and then we were like, hmm, maybe we should make an organization out of this. [laughter] I remember we were thinking about the name for a long time. I think we were trying to think of, like, a cool acronym. I think that's the hardest part of building an organization [laughter] is finding the name. Like, what's catchy? What's not long? What's not boring? And I, like, randomly was like -- I think I said Thriving Muslims at first, which sounded super weird, and then everyone's like, "Yeah! Why don't we just, like, make it...? Isn't, like...? This is just like Thrive. You know, we want people to Thrive." And I think that's where Muslims Thrive came from. I'm just really glad we didn't go with Thriving Muslims. [laughter]

But yeah, that's kind of how it was born. We were just a small group who wanted to talk about it, and we were like, maybe we should just do more than just this event. You know, maybe we have to have more events. Maybe we need to have trainings. And that's how it was born: just a bunch of likeminded people, thinking we need to do something. We all had similar ideas and passions, but being able to sit there together and think how do we now, you know, make these things happen... I was, like, telling my husband, I was like, "Remember you wanted to make that think tank? It's not a think

tank, but something happened. [laughter] It's better than us just talking about it with ourselves." So, yeah.

STRONG: How did you connect with Sarah Sayeed?

HOQUE: That was through Sadyia, who was at CAIR [Council on American-Islamic Relations] at the time. We knew each other, I think, from MUNA and other Bangladeshi community things that I was involved in. And so it's just like you meet people who meet people who meet people, and then you all become friends, and that's kind of how Muslims Thrive happened for us.

STRONG: Tell me about some of those early conversations. What were other people seeing that were barriers to starting this road map?

HOQUE: I think what I was going through when I was struggling was very much what other people were going through, and it was just like, how can I talk about it with my community when people don't understand how to respond to me, when people don't know how to, like, respond empathetically, or judge me for being -- for having any sort of mental illness, because, oh my God, you must be weak, you must have weak faith. So we early on -- and I think that's sometimes -- like, like, my nature, I, like, often, like, jump to, like, this is a thing that's wrong with our community, [laughter] and, like, making these lists of all these things that are wrong with our community. And we're like, well, okay, how do we fix them now?

And I think at that time, being in grad school was very helpful, because, you know, taking all these needs and assets assessment classes, I realized that it's not just about the needs. There are so many assets, and so many wonderful things that are happening, and we need to recognize those, too. And so we're like, all right, what can we do that, like -- what can we support that's already existing? And we found other organizations throughout the country that were trying to do things with Muslim mental health. There was nothing in New York at the time. There isn't really even now. And then trying to follow some of Thrive NYC's footsteps, we were just -- we had a lot of grand ideas, so many ideas. And then we had to do, like, the official nonprofit stuff,



the filing and the fees and the, you know... Once it started getting official, we're like, okay, it needs to be more than just ideas. We now have to be an actual organization. We have to have board members and positions and elections. And then it became not that much fun. But at the same time, we were like, we cannot be like all those other organizations that come together and fall apart because we're not passionate enough. We clearly have that passion, and we see it every time we sit together, and we're like, "We should do an event on this, and we should do an event on that." And so the early conversations were very much, "This is what I had in mind." Everyone had their own thing in mind, and it was really great just hearing everyone's ideas, 'cause so many of them were similar.

STRONG: So what are some of the things that -- now that you guys have been active for a little while, what are some of the things that work? How do you connect with people, and what are the needs you're seeing?

HOQUE: I think that -- and I keep going back to this -- like, you're never alone. We just -- I literally just last week put out this survey for 2019, for people in the New York Tri-State Area, to fill out of, like, what kind of programming do you think you want us to do. And people are wanting the same things. You know, people want to talk about things that they're -- they don't talk about out loud. And I think that's what's worked for us. We, like, started talking about all the hard things first. [laughter] We did our general 101, and then we did something on the traumas of incarceration, and then we did childhood sexual abuse. Then we did domestic violence. So we were talking about the not easy things. And those had a lot of roadblocks and hurdles along the way, but being able to talk about things that people were silent about for so long was what helped connect us with people, 'cause they were like, "Wow, I'm really not alone. I'm not, like, the..."

For me, the childhood sexual abuse one was -- that was very near and dear to me, as someone who's experienced it. And I remember I was the person who planned it. And I remember very, very intentionally wanting it to be at a masjid. I was like, "This is not a place that's ever talked about." [laughter] And I was like, "We are going to have it at a

masjid.” We were struggling to find a venue for months. All the masjids that I went to were like, “Oh, we’re, like -- we’re, we’re busy that day,” and I’m like, “I didn’t give you a date!” [laughter] And just very much dismissive. Some of them were like, “Oh, is that appropriate to talk about here?” And I’m like, “This is exactly the place where it should be talked about.” And I remember being very stubborn about it, like, “No, we are having it at a masjid. I don’t care how long we have to wait.” And then I was just able to get in touch with my old high school principal, who was just like, “Yeah, sure,” at his masjid, which is a big space in Queens. And I was just like, oh my God, we finally found a place.

But that one was a very rough one. It was extremely difficult to write out the content. It was really eye-opening when we had over 200 RSVPs. It’s a free event, over 200 RSVPs, and then the day of there’s, like, not even 50 people there, but we were Facebook livestreaming it and there’s a bunch of people watching. And so I’m like, what does that show me? It’s like people want to be there but they’re afraid. And we started doing these Google Voice questions where people are texting in questions, and I think -- I was sitting in the car and just cried for, like, hours, because I was reading the Google Voice questions, and people were telling us, like, some of the deepest, darkest secrets that they’ve held for so long, people sharing their own, like, abuse stories. And I was just like -- it was hard. [laughter] It was really hard. I, I, I was like-- I just could not stop crying, reading these questions. But I think that’s how we connect. We find these, like, really hard topics to talk about, and we roll with it.

And, you know, our Traumas of Incarceration event, you know, formally incarcerated people came, and they were just like, “No one cares about us. It is extremely validating to hear people talk about this.” I think that’s where it is. Like, we’re connecting with people in a way that they never thought would happen.

Our domestic violence event, we did it in Brooklyn, and we had -- it was like a panel discussion, and then it was like s-- we divided it into circles, like brothers and sisters. And that -- the group discussion was supposed to be a half hour, and 20 minutes passed by, and I was like, there is absolutely no way I'm breaking this up right now. People are connecting in a way that they haven't connect-- like, it was eye-opening, 'cause there were some women there who were sitting there, and they're, like, listening to the panelists talk about the signs of domestic, like, violence, and they're just like, wait a second, check, check, check, check. What does that make me? And that was very difficult for some of these women. And, I mean, people came up to us and, like, "This is the best event you guys have had." Because we had -- we never had that personal circle in any of our other events.

But people being able to connect with other people in a way they never do, and talk about some of their, like, deepest, darkest secrets, it was -- it was very much needed. There was so much, like -- [laughter] there were so many tears. And it was -- it was horrible because at that masjid in Brooklyn, like, there's, like -- there's not that much of a divider between the men and the women, so we hear the guys laughing [laughter] in their support -- like, what the hell are they laughing about while we're here crying? And I remember texting my husband. I was like, "What the hell is wrong with you guys? Why are you laughing?" And then afterwards, we reconnected with the guys, and they were just like, "That was one of the most incredible support circles that we've ever had, you know, and we were talking about really important things, as men." And I was just like, huh. And, you know, everyone has their own coping mechanisms, and they were, like... Whatever they were talking about, they were laughing, and, like, it felt like a great connective space. And meanwhile, I'm, like, yelling at him, like, "Why are you guys...? There's nothing to laugh about here! [laughter] What is wrong with you men?" And they were just like, "Wait, what? Like, we're getting what we need, and we talked about a lot of sens-- we cried, too!"

So it was really funny, and I think it just, like, goes to show, like, connecting with people and, like, really feeling what they feel is what set us apart, and I want us to never lose touch with that, and, like, just... I don't want us to be, like, the type of organization who's just like, "We had 20 events this year," and, like, we're, like, you know, checking off boxes. I want us to, no matter what we do or how big we get, to just always be connecting with people on that level.

STRONG: This is really interesting to me because in other contexts where I've asked people about, like, mental health or domestic violence challenges in Muslim communities, I've heard some ideas about how it's really important to get community leaders involved, get the imam involved, but what you're describing is connecting people directly to each other, rather than going through a hub.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: Can you talk to me about why that works, or why that's important?

HOQUE: Because I think we are trying -- we definitely are trying to do the community leaders thing, but often what happens in -- when you're trying to connect to community leaders is that the actual community gets left behind.

STRONG: Tell me what you mean by that.

HOQUE: I've been in -- I've been part of -- and sometimes I'm like, why am I here? Because I don't -- I never saw myself as a community leader, and I don't -- I still don't. I've been in, like, community leader circles where people are -- like roundtables and, like, discussions where I've been invited to, and everyone's talking about these are the issues that are impacting our community, and I'm like, how many of you guys actually spoke to the community? And that's where it's like -- having that survey was so important for me, 'cause I was like, I can say these are the top ten things that I want us to discuss as an organization. These are top thing -- ten things that I want us to talk -- like, you know, have events on, but they might not be what the community wants. And so that's when I say, like, when the community gets left behind, because who is in those circles? It's just community leaders. And I don't know how they're connecting back.

And I think it's just like you have to have both, and I think right now we're very much focusing on hearing out the actual community. And I think sometimes community leaders, in their best intentions, tend to lose sight of what their -- like, whether it's an imam -- like, what their congregants want, or, like, what they need, and, like, what their constituents want.

You know, when we started doing the mental health first aid trainings, we started with adult mental health first aid. We got so many requests. It was a little overwhelming at first. We're like, well, all of us have full-time jobs. Our two trainers -- are full-time jobs. Our two trainers were our president, Omar [Shareef], and my husband, Sayed [Bhuiyan]. Both of them are working professionals. How the heck are we going to do all of these requests? And guess who was requesting them. It wasn't the community leaders. These were regular people who were like, "I want this done at my masjid." And I'm like, "Okay, but let's talk to your imam because he's the one that can decide whether this is going to be held at the masjid." So it was just like -- it was the community who was requesting it from us, and not community leaders.

We had some. I'm not going to say that we didn't have any. We definitely had some community leaders come to us and be like, "I want this for my congregants." But it was mostly community... Like, you know, it was just, like, people from the masjid, and people from this organization. We weren't getting in touch with leaders; we were getting in touch with the community members, and then having to go to the leaders. And that still sometimes happens now with our requests. So...

STRONG: I'm curious about what the support structures or people are, whether they're Muslim communities, Muslim immigrant communities. Is it healthcare providers? Schools? Mosques? Like, where do people find their hubs of support to...?

HOQUE: I think people very much find it in their social circles, and that social circle, depending on, I guess, how much you, like -- how much you are involved in, like, you know, your faith, can be your masjid. It could be the, like, men and women at your

masjid. It could be, you know, just your friends. But there's not a lot of formal support, and that's definitely something that I've been wanting to explore for a long time. Like, where are the supports for people? Where's it coming from? And it's often very informal.

STRONG: This makes me think about your own neighborhood, where the, the access to the formal space, the mosque, is mostly for men, and women don't have that access. So in their case, would it have to be informal --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- structures of support, and how does that --

HOQUE: Where else are they going to go? [laughter]

STRONG: What does that look like? How do they achieve that?

HOQUE: Friends. It's very much people... And I think this goes back to, like, when you immigrate here, you choose where... Like, you have some sort of choices, like, where you can live, and in -- particularly in Ozone Park, I'm thinking, like, that's where predominantly the Bangladeshis who live there are from Sylhet. So most of the Sylhetis move to that neighborhood, 'cause that's where they know people, you know. People from, like, back home, like, "Oh, we're neighbors back home," like, that's where you're moving to if you can. And so people are moving to where they're familiar, like, where they know other people who have immigrated and live in that neighborhood. And so there are some existing relationships for people that they, like, latch onto when they move here. So it's like my mom is friends with people who she knew back home, and that's what makes this easier. I think it's a lot more difficult for people who have no ties to anybody, might not have any family that live here, where it's like now you have to go out and, like, find people, but it's hard. Sometimes women get support just dropping their kids off at school, you know, where you, like -- you're, you're at pickup, or you're at drop-off, and you're talking to other parents. That might be some of the only times some women get to connect with each other, and then that becomes, like, you know, "I'll come over to your house and we'll have some tea," and that's where it starts. So it is

very informal. And because it's informal, it has to be something you're intentionally trying to get.

STRONG: And know how to ask for.

HOQUE: And know how to ask for, and that's a difficulty.

STRONG: So how...? I mean, that's a challenge for your organization to --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- tap into these informal networks. How do you find them? How do you...?

HOQUE: I think we need to work harder, because so far those informal networks that we've connected with are because we are a various group of people who have those informal network that we know of, so we are connecting them, like, by ourselves, but we now need to go out and find those informal networks. Like, I have to make that effort to talk to, like, some of my mom's peers who I've never spoken to, who I'd never had a desire to speak to, but now I'm like, if I want them to, like, connect with me, I need to go and, like, put myself out there. My other, like, organization members, we all need to put ourselves out there. And, you know, I don't want to call it networking, but in a sense -- like, I'm trying to create this community now. So we've also used our existing communities to do what we're doing at Muslims Thrive, and now we need to branch out.

STRONG: So where, where are your connections? I mean, you've got East New York City line, Ozone Park.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: Other members have connections in different parts of the city --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- I imagine.

HOQUE: Yeah. We all have --

STRONG: So what neighborhoods are you in right now?

HOQUE: I was -- I was just looking at some of our data that we got back from... Like, I'm like, every day I'm checking for more responses. I'm like, ooh, most of the people here are from Queens, [laughter] because people are sharing it with their friends in Queens,

and thinking of, like -- I have different connections and different, like -- I have some connections to Kensington, and I have some connections to Parkchester in the Bronx, and I have some connections to, like, Jackson Heights, Hillside. And then I have my professional connections. I have my school connections. I have other, like, social circles that I've been in. So we all have various connections that we try to use.

And so now I'm like, how do we, in 2019, create those new connections? [laughter] How do I force myself out there? 'Cause I've always been in familiar spaces, and every time I've had to, like, do something new -- so, like, Columbia was very new for me. I was outside of Brooklyn, [laughter] in a space where I wasn't like everyone else. You know, working at NYU, same thing. So I'm like, okay, I can do that professionally and academically; how do I do that now socially? I'm friends with people who I share affinity with. I tend to not be friends with people who -- especially after the elections, I don't want to be friends with you if we can't... [laughter] Like, I have a lot of values, and if you don't follow those val-- I can't be friends with you. And I don't need to be friends with people, but I need to, like, put myself out there and talk to people that I might not necessarily always agree with. So that's a challenge for me. [laughter] It's sort of like a New Year's resolution, but we'll see.

STRONG: So, you know, separate from this but kind of parallel to it, the examples we talked about over the phone of the, the violence and the hate crimes in City Line and Ozone Park really lay bare how some of these structures of support work, so I'm wondering if you can tell me about your experience of the community response in 2016.

HOQUE: Yeah, I think that the community response to the imam being killed, his an-- and his assistant being killed was that it showed -- it, for me, as an adult, showed how different men and women in our community operate. You know, women were thriving on those informal networks to, like, provide -- you know, go to the affected -- like, their wives' houses and, like, give them food and give them support and, like, give them a shoulder to cry on, and, like, make sure their kids were doing their homework, and they were fostering that informal sense of connection; whereas the men were trying to



formalize some things. They were like, "We want justice and we want it now." And I think -- like, like, that was, like -- there was very different focuses. You know, women were like, "How do we help this woman now whose husband was murdered, who has a lot of children? How's she going to cope now?" And the men were like, "Okay, but how do we address this as a community now? How do we make sure that the person gets justice?" And so very different focuses, and seeing that was very eye-opening for me, 'cause it was just like, well, that's how you, like...

Whoever I talk to, like, I have to tap into how they view the world. Like, talking -- a lot of times, often, talking to men -- and my difficulty has been, like, talking to them about mental health, I'm like, this is not working out. [laughter] Now I'm angry, because you're invalidating my feelings, 'cause you're invalidating your own feelings, because you don't feel like mental health is important. But if I talk to you about it from a policy lens, or a, you know... Like, if I talk to you about it from a more formal lens, where I'm like, I want, you know, this many people in the neighborhood to be trained in mental health first aid, then they're a little more receptive to it. And then with a lot of the women -- and I feel like I'm shoe-horning people, and I don't want to do that, and I'm, like, trying to see how I can do things differently.

But I think that playing to people's strengths has been helpful in, like, connecting with them. And often when I'm talking to men, I'm not -- I'm not doing it from an emotional basis, whereas when I'm talking to a lot of the women in my neighborhood, when I'm talking to my mother about mental health, I'm not talking to her about numbers. She doesn't really care. Like, she's like, "Oh, cool," when I tell her, like, we've trained over, like, fifteen hundred people. She's like, "Oh, cool," right? but if I can talk to her about, like, you know, this person was able to talk to their friend about taking their own life, then all of a sudden the conversation shifts and she's more receptive to talking about it.

And, again, it's like -- it feels like this weird stereotyping, and it feels icky that I'm saying this, and at the same time I see myself doing that in how I connect with different community members because of, like, what I've seen, and that incidence of the imam being, like, the -- you know, people being gunned down in, like, broad daylight was very eye-opening for me in how the community responded. You know, men were, like, out marching on the streets, looking for, you know, justice, and, like, wanting this person who, like, shot them to, like, get locked up, and, like, going to city officials, and, you know, trying to, like, you know, be on the news and be like, "We want justice and we want it now," and not really getting any input from the women. Meanwhile, the women are, like, "Well, let me make sure you don't have to cook. Let me make sure you don't have -- like, that you don't have to worry about your children.

STRONG: I want to place you in this story, specifically, like, 'cause you --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- had a role as a community liaison that year.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: How did -- how did that come about?

HOQUE: I think that just came about, again, with connections. Like, I -- my parents live right behind that mosque. Like, from our window, it's like the m-- like, it's just we're right behind that mosque in our block. We're on the same block. And I, I had, like, a conference that day, and I remember at the conference, like, I got this news notification. I was like, oh my God, this is, like, right where my parents live. I'm, like, freaking out, calling my mom, and she's just like, "Yeah, something just happened and I don't really know." And then coming home, and then Dr. Sarah Sayeed, who is the community, like, advisor who is the Mayor's liaison with the Muslim community comes because she has to address this, and I'm right there. She knows me. I'm right there. I can help her in some way. And so that came about very naturally. I wasn't like, "I want to be in this space," 'cause the last thing I wanted was to be in a room full of angry men who were like "We want justice and we want it now and we don't want to hear anything that you have to say, other than we want to catch this killer." So, not a space I wanted to

put myself in, but because it was like -- it felt like -- I was like, I can help her in whatever gaps that she has in knowledge about this community, I will.

STRONG: So she had to go and make a statement while there were protestors.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: Tell me about that. How did that go? What was the response?

HOQUE: Well, people... People were angry, and very rightfully so. People were angry that something like this could happen in our community, in broad daylight, and, you know, you placed your own assumptions on this. You placed your own assumptions, like, what happened. Like, you know, this was a Muslim imam, who was visibly Muslim, being gunned down in broad daylight. What other reason could it be, other than a hate crime? Why else would he be killed? And so even before anything came out, it was just a lot of anger, because people were th-- I don't know if people were thinking -- like, I -- when I came back to see my family, everyone was just like, "That could've been me." And so maybe people were operating from this place of fear, that something like this could happen to me or my family members, but they were very -- like, there was -- it was a very heated environment. And, you know, so much kudos to, like, the way that Dr. Sayeed is always handling things, very calm and collected, 'cause now there's the pressure on her. You're a Muslim representative [laughter] of the mayor. Like, you need to make sure -- all this responsibility falls on you. You need to make sure that the mayor knows about this, and that there's justice. And I think that was, like -- well, I was like, I never want to be in that place of people placing that responsibility on me, like, the responsibility to assuage their fears on me. And that was what was happening: you know, trying to make a statement while also trying to calm people down, but also validating their anger. It's a lot.

And I just -- I remember -- I think there was this guy who was just yelling behind my ear, and I was like, oh my God, could you just shut up and let her talk? [laughter] And he was just like, "Who are you? [laughter] How do you have the nerve to tell me that?" You know, we're in that masjid's, like, yard. She's making that statement. I've never

been to that masjid, 'cause it's a very small space. They are currently building a space that's going to have women. Like, at that t-- like, at that time there was no space. I've never been in that masjid, even though my par-- my dad goes every day. And all of a sudden I'm, like, yelling at this guy here, like, "Shut up!" [laughter] Like, "Stop yelling for two seconds!" And then they're like, "Wh-- excuse me? Who are you? You know, we're community members." And I'm like, "I'm a community member, too."

And so, again, it's like, who do they view as community members that are impacted? It was a very weird time, and I remember a bunch of media outlets from other countries, too, reached out to me, and I'm like, "I don't know what you want me to say. Like, this is -- my community is hurting right now, and I don't know what I could do to tell -- like, what do I tell you? Other than my community is hurting right now, and this should've never happened, and it happened, and I want justice for this person -- like, you know, for him, too." It was a very weird space for me to navigate.

STRONG: Yeah. I think over the phone you said that you and Sarah and Debbie Almontaser, right, were, like, the only women at this action?

HOQUE: Yeah, and there was -- yeah, there was someone else from CAIR. I'm really blanking on her name right now. So, yeah, there was, like, maybe three or four women, and there was men, like, around the entire block, like, hundreds of men. And then there were so many cops, and just, like, the feeling of cops being around, and knowing that me, I'm like, "I don't feel comfortable with cops being around," and a lot of the community, like, men are like, "We feel comfortable that the cops are around. [laughter] You know, we feel protected." I'm like, "I don't feel protected!" That's why I was like, I don't feel like I could represent this community properly in how they feel. I don't feel comfortable with cops being around all the time. After that day, the cops were always there, and I was going to work, and I was going to class, and they're right there all the time. I didn't feel protected, but many of those community members did. And so I was just like, I'm not -- I'm representing one truth in that space, and it's not the truth of the majority who are like, "We want the cops here all the time." You know,

from that night, everyone -- like, everyone was just like, all right, where are the cops at? [laughter] We need to have them here now, and they need to stay. It was a very different opinion.

STRONG: Were you also present at any of the, the outreach that women did? Like, were you ever in the room with the survivor's family, or anything like that?

HOQUE: No, and I don't think it would've been my space to do it, anyway. I feel like there's a huge generational --

STRONG: Ah.

HOQUE: -- gap there.

STRONG: Good point.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: Did your mother partake in any of that?

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: What did she tell you about it?

HOQUE: They went to see her, and, you know, this woman is devastated. And she was just talking about how the women were trying to comfort her, and it's just like, it's hard for her to say anything 'cause she's just so busy crying. So I was like, I'm definitely glad I'm not in that space, 'cause I would've felt like an intruder, 'cause this is a way a lot of the older women are coping. That's not -- that's not my space. And I'm -- the men, how they were reacting was also not my space. And I don't think I was the only, I guess, youth [laughter] who felt that way.

STRONG: Yeah. You -- when we spoke over the phone you told me about another incident in 2004, when you were much younger, that happened --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- right in front of your home. Would you like to share that story as a comparison?

HOQUE: I think there's a lot of parallels in the sense that this was a young man who was shot, right in front of my parents' house at that time, and, again, women responding by going over to their house and making sure everything was okay, and men being like,

“All right, so there’s this court case happening. There’s, like -- what’s going on? How can we help financially?” It was very parallel.

STRONG: And what was your experience of it as a young person?

HOQUE: I think for me it was a little different, because I was very young. I was, like, maybe nine or ten. It was the summer. I had heard the gunshots, and I thought it was fireworks, because it was August. And I think I reacted very badly to it, ’cause I knew him. He was a family friend, and at that time -- okay, I remember it was after fourth grade, and I had a lot of hospital visits that I had -- I had, like... I -- the doctor wanted me to see a gastroenterologist, and he would take my mom and I there, to Brooklyn Hospital, so right by LIU. He would take us there, ’cause, like, my dad was working. And this was a guy who was, like, in school, like, going to work and, like, still making time for us. We’re not his family, you know; we’re his mom’s friends, like, his dad’s, like, friend... Like, we’re not family, and yet he was making the time to make sure I got to my doctors’ appointments at Brooklyn Hospital. So I think my reaction was very personal. It was like, I don’t know how to feel about this. This guy’s gone. His brother was my age, and a friend, and I didn’t know how to support... I was a nine-year-old who was like, “I don’t know what to do. [laughter] I’m feeling a lot of feelings, too.” But also witnessing how my parents supported their family, and how other community members supported their family in that really rough time. But a lot of parallels.

STRONG: Yeah. What did you gain, as a young person, from seeing the support that was available?

HOQUE: Being a shoulder to cry on. I think that seeing situations where something happened in our community that was very sad and, like, seeing how people, like, held out their hand to be like, “I can support you.” Like, and it wasn’t the formal grieving process, like, you know, like, supporting someone in ment... Like, there was no acronym for it the way there is in mental health first aid, and yet people were still doing some of those things that we recommend when someone’s going through a tough time. And always recognizing that no matter how formal or well-researched the strategies that I want to use are, like, there are a lot of people doing these informally in our

communities, and always going back to my roots, and being like, I'm -- like, you know, my -- one of my, like -- parts of my identity is realizing that my people are not as ignorant as I thought they were. There is so much to learn from the people that I grew up with. There is so much to learn from my parents, people who don't have formal educations, in how I can treat other human beings.

STRONG: So this is making me think of your asset lists --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- that your --

HOQUE: Exactly.

STRONG: -- your impulse was to sort of, like, like, what do these communities need? What do they need?

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: And now you've just described their strengths.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: So how do you -- now, how are you finding ways to direct colleagues' attention to these strengths? How are you finding ways to tap into these strengths?

HOQUE: Talking about it. I think the more people know about what's going on, the more people hear about it, the more... Like, I think of, like, cultural competency for health professionals. It's like, you can't learn -- like, you can't learn it, like, unless... You can't know about it unless you, like, learn about it, I would say. And if I can do -- and if I can teach you something from what I've observed, then I'm helping you with that, and then I'm helping myself with that. A huge example for me, wakeup call, was at NYU we got a grant to look at immigration-related stressors in the Bangladeshi community, because there was already being -- research being done with La- like, Latinx in New York City, particularly, I think, Mexican and Dominican families, and how much the immigration climate was impacting them, and impacting family engagement, impacting, like, parent and child mental health. And so we wanted to look at Bangladeshis, too, because there are a pretty large population of undocumented Bangladeshis.

And one of the first things that we did was create a community advisory board of people in the community who've done the work, and we -- in our first community advisory board we gave them our survey. [laughter] It was very long, and I remember the first thing, they were just like, "This is way too long. What is this? No one's going to complete this. It's way too long. It's way too wordy. You're taking out this question, and you're taking out that question. Here's what parents are going to respond to." And I was like, I could've been that Bangladeshi representative in the study, you know? I could've been like, ooh, I know my community; this is how we're going to do the research. And then I give it to them and they're ripping this paper apart, in the best way, and I'm like, oh, I didn't know any of this.

And then we were talking about interviews. I was like, I also want to interview people from community-based organizations to talk to me about how they've been dealing with it, with the clients that they're, like, working with, [laughter] and in research we're calling them "key informants." And I didn't think anything of it at that time, and then my stake -- like, my advisory board is like, "Why are you using the word 'informant'?" [laughter] Do you not know...?" And I was like, I very much know personally the impact of, like, informants on the Muslim community, and here I am, I'm like, "I'm looking for key informants on this research!" [laughter] So, huge blind spot for me.

And that is, like -- I can... I also have a lot to learn when it comes to cultural competency. Just because I am a part of a culture does not mean I know everything, and there's always other people to guide me and, like, talk to me about their experiences and what they know. Because if they weren't there, I would've been [laughter] looking on social media, like, "I'm looking for key informants for this study," and people being like, "Why? What is she going to...? Wait, what?" And I'm, like, thinking of, like, how I could've harmed my community by doing that. Huge blind spot.



And I think it's like, always humbling myself, and, like, I don't know everything about my community, and that's okay, because I have other people that know other things, and can fill in the gaps for me. And as I'm doing that, my colleagues, who are not part of this culture, are also learning. They're learning a lot from my mistakes, as well as their mistakes, and they're learning a lot from just all the things that we've gained. I've learned so much about the Bangladeshi community over the last year that I did not know.

STRONG: Like what?

HOQUE: Well, I think I was very priv-- I'm so privileged in that I don't have to worry about my citizenship. That itself is a huge blind spot for me. Like, I don't have to s-- wake up and think about I could possibly get deported. I never have that fear. And to learn and, like, listen to parents who have that fear, who are literally paralyzed by that fear every day, who are thinking about their children, and being separate from their children, I learned how privileged I am in my ability to share their narrative.

And I just -- I learned about how parents cope, because that's something that we asked people, and I learned about, like, again, like, informally coping people. Like, oh, I just -- when I get stressed out, I just play video games, or, like, I watch TV, or, like, talk to my cousins or sisters and siblings in Bangladesh.

It was -- it was very eye-opening for me, 'cause I, I realized that there was so much from the Bangladeshi community that I didn't know, so many struggles and so many triumphs that I had no idea about, because I don't work in immigration, or because I don't work in a community-based organization, I would say. I do work in an academic institution. There is so much privilege in that.

Talking to the stakeholders when stakeholders are like, "I can't afford to get burnt out, because if I get burnt out, where does that leave the community?" Here I am complaining [laughter] that I have to work extra hours in the field, and they're like, "I

can't afford to get burnt out." It was a huge, huge shift in awareness for me. I'm like, oh, I, I sound really whiny right now. [laughter] It's just talking to the stakeholders, thinking about there are people who are so much more involved in the community than I will ever be, and there is so much to learn from them. There is so much that I can model. Like, just, like, modeling myself after them, it was a really great experience, to be able to talk to people.

STRONG: What are some of the, the findings of this study, like, overall? What stand out to you?

HOQUE: [laughter] Immigration stress is a factor. You know, it's like, in, in my head I'm, like, thinking, duh, but to, like, you know, get the data on it, and to, like, talk to people where they're like -- the, like -- just being vulnerable impacts your health: impacts your physical health; impacts your mental health; impacts your sleep. That's what we found. And I was just like, okay, like, it is extremely validating to have statistics on Bangladeshis, 'cause there's none. There's, like, barely anything. And most of the studies that we have of Bangladeshis in New York City have been done at NYU, by the Center for Studies on Asian American Health, which is the one that funded our grant. But they were all in physical health. They were about hypertension and diabetes, and other stuff that the community is very much facing, but there was nothing on mental health. So just to have some numbers, you know, when people are telling us that, like, having numbers will help us with funding? Like, if I, in my place of privilege, can do anything to help you get funding -- I don't have to worry about funding, but you guys do. You're literally on a daily basis trying to, like, run these programs with so -- so stretched thin, but you're doing it every day because you can not afford to not do it. Like, if we can help with some of the data then, like, I need to find a way to do that.

STRONG: So if this data becomes available to smaller organizations...

HOQUE: Yeah. And, I mean, that's -- and that's where, like, having another community advisory board comes in. It's like, all right, we got all this data. How do we -- what do we do with the community? If we're finding that people are not talking about status, because it's a very sensitive and often dangerous thing to talk about, how do we make

it so that people feel safe to talk about it, so that they could get the resources that they need? And that's not something that I can answer. I don't work in that. So one of my biggest findings for myself was valuing feedback from other sources of information that I might not know of.

STRONG: So, zooming out a little bit, your position at NYU now is as a researcher, as...?

HOQUE: As a research coordinator. I help with the data management, so it's not like I'm, like, here sitting about -- like, sitting, thinking about all these grants that I could, like, apply for. I'm here supporting existing research. And how do I, like -- how do I help my community in that capacity is something that I often think about.

STRONG: What...? I mean, if you could pick a study to do next that you think is most needed, what would you design?

HOQUE: Ooh, I really want to do something on memes. [laughter]

STRONG: What? Okay, tell me about that.

HOQUE: I really... I'm like -- sometimes I'm like, I wish I could redo my master's thesis --

STRONG: Yeah.

HOQUE: -- and thinking about how I'm -- I love memes. I have folders in my phone, photos of, like, memes that I've saved, and, like, different categories, too. [laughter] And a lot of ti-- a lot of the memes that I see now are, like, related to mental health, and some of them are really dark. Like, extremely dark. It's like, "Ha, ha, I want to die." But it's a funny thing, and people are laughing, and people are sharing it. And I really want to -- I think about, like -- I, I feel like things are growing so quickly in pop culture that there's actually... It feels almost like a generational difference between myself and my 15-year-old brother.

STRONG: Huh.

HOQUE: And so I'm like, I really want to talk to teens and be like, "How are you using...?" And also young adults, too, 'cause I often use them. Like, "How are you using memes, where we're laughing about our depression, we're laughing about our anxiety, we're laughing about wanting to kill ourselves, frankly? How are we using them as coping mechanisms? How are they helping? How are they hurting?" And I'm like, dang, I wish

I'd done my thesis on that [laughter] so I could explore and talk to, like, young adults, and be like, "What are you thinking when you share this meme? What are you thinking when you're like, you know -- where you share this picture of, like, a sad cat, and talking about, like, mood? You know, like, what are you thinking?" I wish I could do [laughter] something on that. It's not necessarily my focus. Like, my focus -- I like babies. I like early childhood. That's, that's where I want to be. But I also want to look at, from the mental health perspective, like, how are these memes helping and hurting? And I want to look back at this conversation in, like, 20 years and be like, ooh, some people have done some great research on that.

STRONG: Wow, okay, there's a lot there --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- 'cause... First of all, you're talking about this generational difference --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- which I'm very interested in, like, even between, like, you in your twenties and --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- like, your brother in his teens, but also the spaces that you've been talking about for doing trainings and healing and stuff have all been, like, physically getting people together --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- but then there's also these digital spaces --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- that you've been utilizing, where people could sort of, from home, without --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- revealing themselves in a public space, send you questions, send you --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- stories, connect with other people. So what is the role of these digital environments in Muslim mental health?

HOQUE: That's what I want to -- I want to look at that. I really want to explore that. I mean, like, thinking of all these meme groups that have come about over the last couple years

-- like, Muslims, there's... Oof, I'm trying to remember it. There's this group called, like, Halal Memes for, like, Jannah Minded Teens, [laughter] and it's like -- it has hundreds of thousands of members now, and it's, like, kids sharing -- I say "kids"; there's people who are a lot older than me, and they're, like, sharing these memes of -- like, related to Muslims, and, like, laughing. And, like, sometimes they're pretty dark, and, like, sometimes they're really light. Sometimes they're really corny. Sometimes they're really problematic. But using that digital space, I definitely see, like -- when I say "generational gap," like, they are us-- like, 15-year-olds are using that space, almost exclusively. I'm like, "Do you guys...?" I, like, ask my brother, like, "Do you talk to your friends or do you all just text each other?" Because they're utilizing this digital space, and I'm, like, really wanting to explore how that's feeling for them.

STRONG: Yeah, 'cause you've talked about how important it is to recognize that you're not alone, that you --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- can find people physically --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- who are thinking and feeling, and then you can build something from there --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- but when people are feeling isolated --

HOQUE: Yeah, I kind of want to --

STRONG: -- and they have their phones --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- does that bring up the same relief for isolation, or does it just perpetuate it, because you don't meet? What is your impression?

HOQUE: Well, that's what I want to -- like, that's what I want to find out. Like, I'm, I'm looking at some of the memes that I, like, post on my Instagram story, [laughter] and they're, like, really depressing, but they're like -- I laugh, you know? And then people are responding to it, like, "LOL, same," you know? People are feeling like, "Yeah, exactly, that's how I feel!" That connection, for me it's like, oh, it's helpful. And, like, I, I,

I remember... And, like, is it always helpful for everyone? And, like, where is the line? I remember -- when I say “generational gap,” like, I don’t listen to the same music that my brother listens to, and so when my 15-year-old brother is listening to this song where a very famous person’s like, “All my friends are dead, push me to the edge,” and I’m like, what?! [laughter] What kind of music is this? And I’m, like, talking to my, my, at the time, like, 19- and 14-year-old brothers, like, “What, what are you listening to right now?”

STRONG: Hold on one sec.

HOQUE: Sure.

STRONG: I need to ask them not to vacuum right now.

[Interview Interrupted.]

STRONG: So we were talking about digital spaces, and the gender gap, and listening to crazy music, and stuff like that.

HOQUE: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I’m talking to my brothers about it, and they’re like, “Oh, these rappers actually openly talk about their mental health and it’s really helpful.” And I’m like, “Did you hear his lyrics?” I’m like, “He’s, he’s like, ‘Push me to the...’” I was like, “Why, why are -- why are people singing about this?” And they’re like, “Well, these rappers are talking about their mental health openly. Isn’t that what you like?” [laughter] And I’m like, “Well, you got me there.”

STRONG: Totally separate issue. Because you were talking about social media, I want to go back and hear the story about meeting your husband in full. [laughter] You sort of -- it was the backdrop for some important moments in your life, but it’s also --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- a really sweet story. So can you just tell me that?

HOQUE: A friend -- [laughter] a friend of ours, a mutual friend of ours, had up this picture of her dad texting her, like, “Oh, come home, there’s biryani,” and she’s like, “On my way.” [laughter] And I do not for the life of me remember what his comment was, but it was something funny, and I liked it. I was just like -- you know, there’s this random guy. Like, I liked his thing. And then I think, like, a day later I got a friend request. I’m like,

hmm. I was -- I was bored, [laughter] frankly. It's not a super sweet, romantic, inspiring story, but I was bored, and, and so I, like, accepted it. And I think I had, at that time -- I feel like a lot of my important moments happen when I'm sick, but I was sick, and I had posted up some status about some... Oh, I think I was talking about, like, how so many people in my family, like, get completely, like, disoriented when they're sick, especially, like, the men. [laughter] You know, it's like, God forbid you have, like, a fever. You're going to act like you're, like, on a hospital bed. And then I was like, sick -- I'm sick, too. And then him and a friend were commenting on my status, like, how much, like, green tea helps. And these two are just going at it, having this whole conversation about different types of green tea, and I'm just ignoring it. And then he apologizes to me. And I think this was on purpose. He, like, messages me privately. He's like, "Hey, I'm so sorry for blowing up your status. How are you feeling?" And I was like, "Ah, this is a segue [laughter] into, like, talking." And we haven't stopped talking since. It was just -- it was a very random encounter, and it just blossomed into a relationship, and I think it's just -- it's the beauty of modern romance, you know? Randomly meeting someone on Facebook.

STRONG: About biryani, green tea --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- and being sick.

HOQUE: Yes. [laughter]

STRONG: Tell me about meeting him in person for the first time. How'd you guys coordinate that?

HOQUE: Just coordinated a time after, after, I think, class. And it -- like, we -- you know, we were talking, we were laughing, and it felt natural. And I think we were like, "Okay, I could talk to you." And I think he, from very early on, was like, "I think I want to marry this girl." I don't think I felt that way at the time. [laughter] But it, it just grew into a really sweet relationship, and I think he just really understood me in a way. You know, being able to talk about... I was like, I can rant to this person about social justice all I want. That's beautiful. [laughter] And this is someone who I wasn't just ranting to, but I

was actually having conversations with. And even now, you know, we have very... We have amazing conversations about any and every social thing that's going on, and I'm like, a lot of our friends -- like, a lot of people that we know in relationships don't really talk about social issues, and, like, I can't picture that. I can't picture just coming home and talking about how my day was with someone, but not being able to talk about the news, and, like, you know, things that are going on. And, like, you know, being in public health, we're both able to talk about public health issues. Like, he works in food policy, and even though that's not my field, I love hearing about it, because so much of it has -- so much of his work has to do with race and justice and economic opportunities, and it's really great to have those conversations.

STRONG: So who is he? Where did he grow up?

HOQUE: He's a -- he grew up in Queens, in Woodhaven, and then Sayed moved to Long Island when he was, I think, in the eighth grade. So he's a Long Island boy. I call him a Long Island boy. I don't -- I don't think he could claim Queens. [laughter] And I've definitely made fun of him for that, 'cause I've always seen Long Island Bangladeshis as very bougie [laughter]. Well, they had the money to move out there, frankly. And I see -- I see it happening in like... Geographically, I feel-- I feel like Bangladeshis move more east as they make more money. You know, they move from Brooklyn to, like, nicer parts of Queens, and then from Queens they move to, like, Nassau and Suffolk County. And so he grew up very differently from me, having a lot of the privileges that I didn't have. But I think him, you know, doing his master's at SUNY [State University of New York] Downstate in Brooklyn, he was able to see a lot of what he never experienced. And I think that has inspired him to do the work that he does in Brooklyn.

STRONG: And now you're a two-person think tank.

HOQUE: [laughter] Yeah, I guess we can call ourselves a think tank. Don't have to, like, file any taxes for it, though, so... But yeah, we're always talking about a lot... And, you know, we don't always see eye to eye on everything, but it never feels like we're invalidating each other's opinions. You know, we -- I joke around and I call him a centrist, and I'm like, "I'm a lot more far left than you are," and it doesn't feel... It doesn't feel... It doesn't



feel bad. Like, I know that ult-- like, I've definitely made him more left in the last five years [laughter]. I was like, score for me. But he's also -- he's also definitely made me a little more open-minded, so... [laughter]

STRONG: Not less left, just more open-minded.

HOQUE: Yeah, not less left, but --

STRONG: Yeah.

HOQUE: -- more open-minded, very much. I think I very much still claim being left, but he's helped me... Like, we recently went on a trip in Newport, and we were -- we did a sailing thing out -- it was beautiful, [laughter] and we were sitting next to this, like, older [Donald] Trump supporting couple from Florida, and I was like, "Sayed, I don't want to be here." [laughter] And I'm, like, already, like, engaging in my defenses. I'm like, I'm not going to even look at these people, and here he is sweet-talking them. I'm like, "Shut up! Why are you talking to them?" And he's like, "I'm just being friendly." And I remember the lady was -- he said something to me about work, and the lady was like, "Oh, you work?" And I was like, "Yes, I work." And I don't think they've ever met any Muslims, apart from us. And I think just -- we started talking, and he was laughing. He's like, "Look at you dialoguing with Trump supporters." [laughter] And I'm like, "Damn it! This is all your fault! You've definitely..." Like, I would've never. If I was by myself, I would have just ignored them for the full two hours we were there, and I would've just talked about, like, how intolerant and ignorant they were. But he made me talk to them, and it wasn't awful, because, I mean, I still have my opinions, but, like, he's definitely made me more -- less judgmental, I would say. I still judge a lot, but not as harshly as I once did.

STRONG: You think the being judge-y is a wall that keeps you from learning something, or do you think it was --

HOQUE: Oh, yeah. Yeah, because I like -- I don't even want to hear from you. [laughter] I've already, like, placed you into this, like, who I think you are, and I don't care to learn more. And he's -- he loves small talk, which means that we never leave anywhere outside -- like, we never leave immediately from anywhere, because he's talking to

people. [laughter] And he's, like, very much like my dad, but loving the small talk. And I'm like, if I want to talk to you, I'll talk to you. If I don't, I'll keep my mouth shut. But here he is, like, getting to know people, and, like, talking to security guards, and talking to delivery people, and I'm just, like, sitting there, listening. [laughter] But in a way -- and I think of, like, how people view me racially, and in their own judgments of where they place me, I often have felt like they see me as, like, when I'm quiet, I'm sitting there, listening to him talk, they see me as a quiet, submissive stereotype of a Muslim woman. And then I feel forced to, like, come out of my shell. Like, I feel like I'm forced to, like, talk to them to prove that, no, this is not like that. My husband does not, like... Like, it's just this whole thing. And then in some ways it's like, I become this person who I'm not just to prove this point. And then I'm like, wait, I do that to people, too. I pigeonhole them, and then they have to prove themselves to me, and now I'm also doing the same.

STRONG: So we've been talking for two hours. [laughter]

HOQUE: Yes.

STRONG: And I know we have to all go home at some point, 'cause you've had a full day of work before this. Just to wrap up, can you tell me what you'd like to be doing in the future, or how you hope Brooklyn or New York City will change?

HOQUE: I want to move back to Brooklyn. [laughter]

STRONG: Just a few blocks away.

HOQUE: I am just a few blocks... Well, actually, no, I think -- I, I, I think I'm really enjoying Queens. You know, I get this, like, perfect -- like, I could drive, but I could also take the train. Like, having that option [laughter] is really nice. But I think that in the future I really want to see projects like Muslims in Brooklyn happening in other boroughs, where there's so much -- like, there's other rich history there, too. I want to see... I want to see -- like in a perfect, ideal world -- and maybe we can make this happen; I don't know -- but, like, I want to see Muslims Thrive opening up centers in each borough, and I want us to provide space for people. And maybe we start out in one borough and see how it goes.

You know, we've been incredibly supported by some of the masjids in Q-- in Brooklyn. Maybe it could start out in Brooklyn; I don't know. But I want to see people feeling safe in a space that I have helped create. I want to see people being able to just sit there and talk to other people. Like, you know, having those support groups, maybe a little more formalized, just so that everyone can access it, so it doesn't feel like I have to, like... Like, I want -- I want it to be accessible to people, and I think that with informal spaces, sometimes a barrier is that I don't know how to -- like, I might not be a person who is good at navigating informal spaces. But kind of formalizing it helps people often, like, overcome that hurdle. And so I want people to have a space where they can get treatment, where they can get support, you know, whether it's, like, a clinician or just a support group.

And I see myself continuing in maternal and child health probably next. I want to really focus on postpartum health. Maybe that's when I -- that's what I want to do next. I'm not sure. The beauty about public health is that I could really do anything. [laughter] I could go into food policy with my husband, but I think he wants his own space. We spend enough time together, because we do all these things together, you know? But I see us always being that team, and doing very different things, but at the same time, supporting him in what he wants to do. He's working on Muslim masculinity and, like, how to talk about men's mental health, and, like, I can support him in that, and he can support me in my stuff, and together somehow we support the community in whatever they need.

STRONG: We didn't talk about postpartum very much. Can you tell me about your interest in that, and...?

HOQUE: I'm not particularly sure why. I don't have kids. [laughter] I don't, like... I don't -- I think that maternal health is very fascinating to me. I think of maternal dispar-- I -- my focus is on disparities, and how people access certain services, and what they can get, and thinking of, like, how much more Black women die from childbirth, and, like, after

childbirth than, like, any other group, and, like, why that is, and how we as a community can, like, figure out -- or, like, as an institution can figure out how to mitigate that, and mitigating that through community wellness and, like, support.

And then, like, thinking of postpartum depression, like, I can't imagine -- like, if I'm already being invalidated by people in my community about feeling depressed -- I don't have any kids or whatever -- I can't imagine, like, for -- and I've heard this from a lot of women -- like, when I have a baby, and I'm feeling really depressed, and I can't explain it, people are like, "You just became a mom. This is sh-- like, this is the happiest time in the, like, the world for you. Why are you depressed? Like, are you not grateful?" And I want to help women feel validated in their depression. Like, it's okay. It's normal, and it happens, and you're going to get over it, and even if you don't, we're going to support you through it. And so I don't think that's happening at all in the Muslim community. And so how do I -- like, how, how do I, in my capacity, my professional and my personal, as a person who's not a mother, how do I support that? I don't know, but that's coming up. Yeah.

STRONG: So one of the last questions I want to ask you is, you know, imagine you encounter this tape 50 years from now.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: Maybe you're jaded and burned out, or maybe you're, like, the leader of a great new movement for --

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: -- mental health. What advice do you have for yourself? What do you think you want to hear?

HOQUE: Well, I hope I wouldn't be burnt out in 50 years. I think that I want to hear... I want myself, in 50 years, to have been someone who always looked back at my community, and also prioritized the community's needs, and not become the leader that tries to forge this new movement without hearing from people and what they really need. So I think I'd want to tell myself to never forget that, and to not think that I'm the only one

that knows things, [laughter] and that there are a lot of things that other people can teach me, to always be a teacher, as well as a student, I think, and always learning from other people.

STRONG: Anything else that we need to put on the record that I should've asked you about?

HOQUE: I don't know. [laughter] I don't think so, but I think -- I just love this project, and I think I was a little nervous to be like, ooh, am I even -- is my story even important enough to hear, for someone to hear 50 years from now? But, you know, as I'm talking I'm like, everyone has such a different story, and maybe you didn't have these huge, pivotal moments in your life, and maybe you didn't do these amazing things, but we all have such a unique story, and I just think that having a project like this -- and you have so many diverse interviewees, you know, people who have done these, like, national-scale things, and people who've done, like, stuff, like, maybe in our -- on their block, or maybe just within themselves, and I think there's just, like -- as I'm talking, like, there's such a beauty to just hearing every single story. So I think I'm just happy, putting that on the record, to be able to share mine. And if anything that came out of it was helpful to anyone that would be an impact for me.

STRONG: Thank you so much for sharing all that you did.

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: I look forward to making this available for others to hear. [laughter]

HOQUE: Yeah.

STRONG: So I guess let's just leave it there. Thank you so much.

HOQUE: No problem. Thank you.